

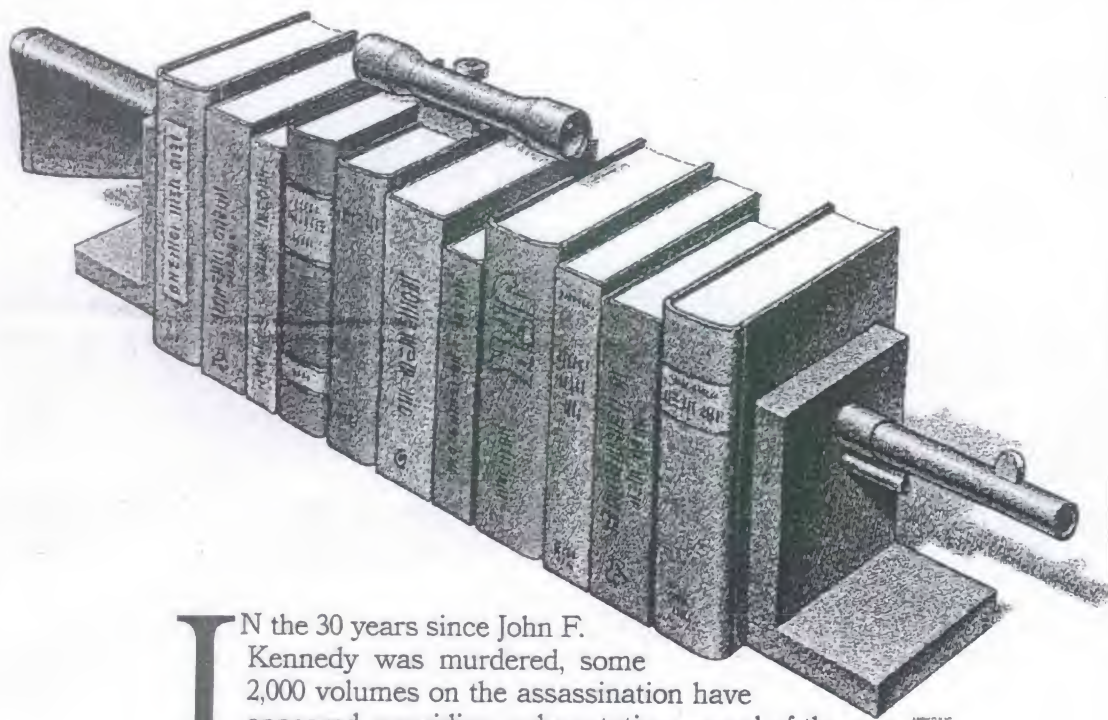
The New York Times

Book Review

November 21, 1993

Section 7 Copyright © 1993 The New York Times

The Death of J.F.K. 30 Years of Assassination Theories



IN the 30 years since John F. Kennedy was murdered, some 2,000 volumes on the assassination have appeared, providing a devastating record of the lengths to which sensationalists have gone to sow suspicion, and editors and publishers have gone to profit from peddling their wares. In reviewing the crop of this anniversary season, Geoffrey C. Ward finds one — Gerald Posner's "Case Closed" — the most daring, and not because Mr. Posner has new explanations to offer or new suspects to name. **Page 15**

The View From Mitteleuropa/3

The Most Durable Assassination Theory: Oswald Did It Alone

By Geoffrey C. Ward

AROUND lunchtime 30 years ago tomorrow, I was browsing in the downstairs stacks of the public library in Cambridge, Mass., when a man appeared at the head of the stairs and announced, "The President's been shot."

It never crossed my mind that he could mean the President of the United States; my first thought was to wonder why anyone should have wanted to shoot the president of Oberlin College, from which I had recently been graduated. I picked out a couple of books and went upstairs. The news was being discussed in low, library tones around the checkout desk, and I managed to overhear only enough to understand that my college's president hadn't been involved after all.

Ah, I thought, then the victim must be the president of Harvard.

Only when I got outside and saw a knot of anguished people gathered around a parked car, its door open, its radio blaring bulletins from Dallas, did the full horror of what had happened hit me.

That an American President might be murdered was unthinkable in 1963. No sitting President had been shot since 1801; none had even been shot at since (though a would-be assassin missed President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933, and two more had been cut down trying to get to Harry Truman in 1950). And John Kennedy's youth and vigor and air of self-confidence had made him seem especially invulnerable.

It is little wonder then that when the Warren Commission issued its report in 1964, naming Lee Harvey Oswald as the lone assassin and denying any previous link between him and his murderer, Jack Ruby, Americans were reluctant to believe it. The country had been traumatized by the assassination, then robbed of the emotional catharsis the accused assassin's trial could have provided. Such profoundly unsettling events demanded a more sweeping explanation, a criminal conspiracy equal to the enormity of the crime. And over the years, as critics of the commission revealed that the C.I.A. and F.B.I. had deliberately withheld information from its investigators — out of bureaucratic unwillingness to admit their own shortcomings or for more sinister reasons, depending on one's degree of skepticism — that initial suspicion was set in stone.

Books ridiculing the official version of the assassination began appearing months before the commission report was in print, and they've been appearing ever since, some serious, some lurid, many simply ironic. There have already been some 2,000 volumes on the Kennedy assassination, according to Gerald Posner, the author of *CASE CLOSED: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* (Random House, \$23, itself one of a baker's dozen of assassination books to appear this anniversary season.

Most of them merely add to the confusion. For example, Gaeton Fonzi, a former investigator for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which conducted its own inquiry in the late 1970's, charges the committee's chief counsel, G. Robert Blakey, with deliberately steering the investigation toward organized crime and away from the real villains, who Mr. Fonzi believes were renegade agents within the C.I.A. (*THE LAST INVESTIGA-*

Geoffrey C. Ward, the author of "A First-Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin Roosevelt," recently won an Emmy as principal writer for "The Kennedys." His "Tiger-Wallahs: Encounters With the Men Who Tried to Save the Greatest of the Great Cats" is being published next week.



TION; Thunder's Mouth, \$24.95). Jean Hill, a highly imaginative eyewitness to the shooting who once asserted that the Kennedys had a "white, fluffy dog" between them in their limousine, now claims Lyndon Johnson was behind the whole thing (*JFK: The Last Dissenting Witness*, by Bill Sloan with Jean Hill; Pelican Publishing, \$17.95). (Her "proof": A police officer, now conveniently dead, once told her L.B.J. had seemed away from Parkland Memorial Hospital.) Robert J. Groden, who is convinced that most of the Kennedy autopsy photographs and X-rays are forgeries, has now produced a big coffee-table book (*THE KILLING OF A PRESIDENT: The Complete Photographic Record of the JFK Assassination, the Conspiracy, and the Cover-Up*, Viking, \$30), in which those ghastly exhibits may be savored in full color. Harrison Edward Livingstone, who once collaborated with Mr. Groden on "High Treason," an assassination best seller, now posits a whole new set of traitors — his fellow authors of assassination books, many of whom, he says, are actually "disinformation specialists," paid to protect Lady Bird Johnson and other masterminds of the conspiracy (*KILLING THE TRUTH: Deceit and Deception in the JFK Case*; Carroll & Graff, \$27.95).

WHO'S WHO IN THE JFK ASSASSINATION: An A-to-Z Encyclopedia, by Michael Benson; Citadel/Carol Publishing, paper, \$18.95 offers capsule biographies of nearly 1,500 "essential people" connected to the Dallas tragedy, ranging from the President's widow to the writer of a self-published book alleging that a man with an umbrella used it to fire a paralyzing dart into the President so that he'd sit still while being shot. Meanwhile, Peter Dale Scott, a professor of English at Berkeley with a stunningly opaque style, argues that responsibility for the President's death rests with "deeper political processes, which have not yet been discerned" (*DEEP POLITICS AND THE DEATH OF JFK*; University of California, \$25).

It is evidence of our continuing national unease about the events in Dallas that Mr. Posner's book seems by far the most daring of the current crop, not because he has new explanations to offer or new suspects to name, but because he makes such a

persuasive case that, for all the Warren Commission's sins, in the end it reached the right conclusions: as Mr. Posner carefully lays it out, the evidence seems overwhelming that Oswald did indeed murder the President all on his own, that his and Ruby's were the case's only smoking guns.

Mr. Posner is not the first writer to make that argument, and although he conducted fresh interviews in the course of writing his book, much that he has to say in it has been said before. Still, it has never been said with such clarity or narrative skill; his is by far the most lucid and compelling account I have ever read of what probably did happen in Dallas — and what almost certainly did not. No serious historian who writes about the assassination in the future will be able to ignore it.

MR. POSNER begins his account with Oswald's arrest for the murder, less than an hour and a half after Kennedy was fatally wounded, of J. D. Tippit, a Dallas police officer who stopped him on the street because his description matched that of the Kennedy shooter; he then traces the events of the tormented life that brought Oswald to that moment. Along the way, Mr. Posner challenges nearly every one of the conspiracists' assumptions. Oswald was a good shot, Mr. Posner insists, and he had plenty of time to get off the shots he needed: Oswald missed with the first one, he argues, wounded the President and Gov. John Connally of Texas with the second, and killed Kennedy with the third. Employing common sense, computer analysis and crisp graphics, Mr. Posner demonstrates that the much derided "magic" bullet did precisely what the Warren Commission said it did: "passed through the President, out his neck, and then caused all of Governor Connally's wounds."

And for all the fevered talk about snipers lurking along the "grassy knoll" or springing up from sewer drains, not one witness in Dealey Plaza claimed at the time to have seen anyone but Oswald fire a shot. The dramatic finding by the House Select Committee in 1978 that there was a "95 percent" likelihood that four shots had been fired at Kennedy

Continued on next page

Oswald Did It Alone

Continued from preceding page

(proving he had been caught in a crossfire) was based on analysis of a police recording of a transmission from the radio of a motorcycle, supposedly in Dealey Plaza, that was later shown to have been miles from the murder scene.

Mr. Posner found no credible evidence that Oswald ever worked for the C.I.A., the K.G.B. or any other intelligence agency, and demonstrates that he received no special treatment from either American or Soviet authorities. He argues that there was never a "second Oswald" (as assorted theories resting on the existence of an impostor claim), and that the real one never knew David Ferrie, the bizarre right-wing pilot with alleged Mafia connections, or Clay Shaw, the New Orleans businessman, or any of the other shadowy figures who peopled the paranoid fantasies of Jim Garrison, the late district attorney of that city, or of his hagiographer, the film maker Oliver Stone. Nor is there anything concrete to suggest that Oswald ever had anything to do with the Mob.

WHAT drove him to murder, then? His own twisted personality, according to the author, the same grandiose inability to understand the real world and his own limited place in it that drives so many other inadequate human beings to violence.

Born in New Orleans in 1939, Oswald never knew his father, who died two months before his birth, and he was raised by a mother so egomaniacal that she would one day come to see the assassination itself merely as further evidence of the world's inexplicable neglect of her: "Let me tell you this," she told the writer Jean Stafford after her son's death, "if you research the life of Jesus Christ, you find that you never did hear anything

more about the mother of Jesus, Mary, after He was crucified. And really nobody has worried about my welfare."

Too erratic to hold a job for long, consumed by self-pity, blaming others always for her problems, Marguerite Oswald dragged her son from city to city (21 moves in 17 years), school to school (a dozen in all), setting the erratic course he would follow throughout his short, wretched life. Oswald was a friendless, belligerent little boy. He frequently punched and once tried to stab his mother (in whose bed he often slept until he was nearly 11); he hurled one knife at his half brother and threatened a sister-in-law with another, fought with his schoolmates, disrupted classes and stayed away from school so often he was finally remanded at 13 to Youth House in Manhattan for a psychiatric examination. "I found him to have definite traits of dangerousness," the psychiatrist recalled when he testified before the Warren Commission, "a potential for explosive, aggressive, assaultive acting out." Asked whether he preferred the company of boys or girls, Oswald told the psychiatrist, "I dislike everybody."

He dropped out of school altogether at 16 because, he said, it could teach him nothing, and buried himself in books on Marxism instead, persuading himself that all the unhappiness and disappointment that continued to corrode his life was somehow being caused by capitalism. At 17, he joined the Marines to get away from his mother, but he was unable ever to shake the sense of perpetual grievance with which she had imbued him, or his anger at a world that stubbornly refused to grant him the recognition she had taught him should be his.

Not surprisingly, the military did not suit him. Cold, sarcastic,

withdrawn, he was taunted as "Ozzie Rabbit" and "Mrs. Oswald" by his fellow marines, and was court-martialed and found guilty twice, first for shooting himself in the arm with a .22 pistol he was unauthorized to carry and again for pouring a drink over the head of a sergeant who had dared assign him to K.P. duty. He subsequently suffered an apparent breakdown, weeping and firing shots into the night while on guard duty. After that he was called "Bugs."

By then he had decided to defect to the Soviet Union, sure his gifts would be recognized by the Communists he had long admired. But, as his newly opened K.G.B. files make clear, the Soviets turned out to be no more admiring of him than his fellow Americans had been. He had to slash his wrists to keep from being expelled from the country once his tourist visa ran out. Two Soviet psychiatrists independently declared him "mentally unstable," according to Yuri Nosenko, a K.G.B. defector, and he was finally granted asylum only because the Soviets feared that if he succeeded in his next try at suicide, they might be blamed for murdering an American tourist.

HE was sent to a radio and television factory in Minsk, where he met Marina Prusakova, the woman who was to become his wife, but quickly grew disillusioned with the grim reality of Soviet life and his own maddeningly obscure place within it. "He didn't want to be among the common people," a Russian émigré who knew Oswald later in America remembered. "He thought since he was a defector and a former Marine Corpsman that he would be given special attention."

He returned to the United States in the spring of 1962 with his wife and infant daughter. He was a failure by any sane definition, virtually friendless, unable to hold on even to the menial jobs available to him, routinely battering his wife whom he forbade to learn English for fear he'd lose control of her. But in his own mind he evidently remained a fearless fighter for what he was soon calling the "radical futurist" cause. He tried but failed to shoot the eccentric right-wing general, Edwin Walker, in the apparent belief that Walker was the harbinger of American fascism. He proclaimed himself head of a local chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee but failed to attract a single member. And he talked of hijacking a jet and forcing it to take him and his family to Cuba, which he had now persuaded himself was the only place he could find a revolutionary role worthy of his talents; while in the grip of this last vision, he took to bounding about his home in his underwear, herding imaginary fellow passengers until his frightened wife began whisper-

ing to their daughter, "Our papa is out of his mind."

In September 1963, Oswald turned up in Mexico City, seeking a visa to enter Cuba and bringing with him a fat dossier he had compiled to impress the authorities: in it, he claimed to be a skilled translator, specialist in "Street Agitation," "Radio Specker [sic] and Lecturer," "organizer," ideologist, soldier and potential spy. Once the Cubans saw it, he assured his wife, he would be welcomed eagerly to Havana. "You laugh now," he told her, "but in 20 years when I am prime minister, we'll see how you laugh then."

The Cubans and Russians did not laugh; Oswald's visit was too unnerving for that: he wept, shouted, pulled a revolver that he said he carried because the F.B.I. was out to kill him. His application was denied, nonetheless.

IN PASSPORT TO ASSASSINATION: The Never-Before-Told Story of Lee Harvey Oswald by the KGB Colonel Who Knew Him; Birch Lane/Carol Publishing, \$22.50, Oleg M. Nechiporenko, a retired officer in the foreign intelligence division of the K.G.B. who was one of the three Soviet officials who interviewed Oswald in Mexico City, confirms Mr. Posner's version of his bizarre visit: "We decided we could not take Oswald seriously. His nervousness, ... his rambling and even nonsensical speech at times, his avoidance of answering specific questions and the shifts from strong agitation to depression gave us reason to believe that his mental state was unstable or that, at the very least, he suffered from a serious nervous disorder."

The only Government on earth Oswald thought worthy of him had turned him away. He returned to Texas, humiliated and filled with anger at the bureaucrats who seemed to block his path no matter where he tried to go. The truly frightening thing about what happened there a few weeks later, as Mr. Posner recounts it, is not the notion that vast, murky forces somehow rule our lives, but that not even the greatest among us is safe when madness and sheer chance happen to converge.

Had the Cubans granted Oswald his visa, for example, he would probably have been in Havana by November, and we would not now know his name.

Had any one of four potential employers to whom he applied for a job when he got back to Texas decided to hire him, he would not have had the opportunity to fire upon the motorcade.

Had a Dallas neighbor not innocently suggested to Marina's closest friend that there might be a job for Oswald at the Texas School Book Depository; had the friend not then followed up with a helpful telephone call to the man in charge; and had that man—who had openings at two different locations—not happened to give Oswald the job at Dealey

Continued on next page

Oswald Did It Alone

Continued from preceding page

Plaza, he would never have gained the vantage point he needed.

And, it should be emphasized, Oswald won access to that sniper's perch more than a month before he could have known that the parade route would pass beneath it, an awkward fact understandably left out of most books alleging that sinister forces conspired to put him within range. Sheer serendipity now offered him a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to strike at the heart of the system he believed the source of all his troubles, to alter history in a way even his wildest fantasies had not afforded him.

On the morning of Nov. 24, 1963, his uncharacteristic run of luck ran out: he asked to be allowed to change into a new sweater before reappearing before the television cameras, thereby delaying his own transfer from the city jail to the Dallas County jail by nearly five minutes. Had he not done so, Jack Ruby (who had been sending a money order at the post office just up the street when the police would otherwise have been hustling Oswald through the jail basement) would have arrived too late to shoot him — and to cheat us of the trial that might have helped lay to rest our worst fears about ourselves and our Government.

MR. POSNER probes Ruby's motives as well, and believes he also acted entirely on his own. A nightclub owner and small-time promoter, he too hoped to make himself a hero and was fully convinced a country grieving for its President would cheer the killer's killer. (In the first minutes after shooting Oswald he must have thought he'd been right; when the crowd gathered across the street from the city jail learned what he had done, they broke into loud applause.)

Despite the cockiness of Mr. Posner's title, "Case Closed," the Kennedy case — like that of Abraham Lincoln, nearly a century older — is likely always to remain open. The crime will always outweigh the man accused of committing it. No one can ever establish beyond a reasonable doubt that however weird Oswald was, he wasn't actually doing someone else's bidding when he carried the paper parcel containing his rifle to the sixth floor of the Book Depository, or that something other than personal demons didn't drive Ruby



Lee Harvey and Marina Oswald leaving Minsk, U.S.S.R., for the United States in June 1962.

to murder him afterward. Thirty years after the event, no one already convinced of one or another of the conspiracy theories is likely to be converted by any narrative, no matter how carefully constructed or well documented. But whatever one thinks about Mr. Posner's conclusions, no fair-minded person should miss his footnotes. There, carefully segregated to keep from muddying his story, he offers a devastating record of the lengths to which sensationalists have gone to sow suspicion and sell books — omitting inconvenient facts, misrepresenting testimony, favoring stories grown more gaudy with the passing years over those first told when details were fresh, libeling the safely dead. Shame is out of fashion these days, but perhaps it's not too much to hope that one or two of the authors Mr. Posner exposes — along with the editors and publishers who have profited from peddling their irresponsible wares — might suffer at least a momentary pang of embarrassment. □

Still an Unthinkable Thought

When Gerald Posner decided to write a book about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, he wanted to identify the issues that were still outstanding almost 30 years later.

"The biggest story here would have been to come up with incontrovertible evidence of a conspiracy," he said. "I applied the same standards of evidence to both sides." It was only after Mr. Posner, who once was a Wall Street lawyer, spent close to 16 months combing the written record and then conducted some 200 interviews that he was convinced he "could reach a conclusion" — that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

That is why Mr. Posner was so surprised at the reaction to "Case Closed." In the two months since it was published, he has had letters accusing him of being a C.I.A. agent or of being on the Federal payroll. Someone has taken the trouble to find out his interview schedule and to fax belittling letters to radio stations. A computer network has asked members to try to discredit the book. In Boston, a group of demonstrators gathered in front of his hotel with signs saying "Case Still Open — Posner's a Dupe."

He also has been surprised by the telephone calls in the middle of the night. Some have



ROBERT APPEL/REUTERS/PHOTOS
Gerald Posner.

been accusatory, some taunting, some obscene. And he was surprised that much of the discussion of the book has centered on his account of what happened in Dealey Plaza, not his detailed profile of Oswald. And he was surprised at how little reaction greeted his interview — the first ever — with Yuri Nosenko, a K.G.B. agent who was kept by American authorities in solitary confinement for two and a half years after he defected. But most unsettling have been the efforts to discredit him. "Perhaps my title is fighting words," he said. "It tells people who spent 20 or 30 years on the case that they wasted their lives."

Mr. Posner pondered the national obsession with the assassination. "This is viewed as the great unsolved murder mystery of the generation," he said. "It is hard for many to swallow the notion that a misguided loser with a \$12 rifle could end Camelot."

KATHY ROSE